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Cat, Heads, It Takes All Sorts, and Okinawan Scene by Yamanokuchi Baku

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Daryl Maude
Cat

Yamanokuchi Baku
猫

Kicked
Flying into the sky
Over the people
Over the tree tops
Even over the moon
And if it reaches the throne of God
It won't fall down, a beast so light,
Completely ignoring how high it should be
Landing on the ground and walking on these four legs.

Daryl Maude
Heads

Yamanokuchi Baku
首

Someone I'd just met,
While having a drink
Cocked their head and said
Are you Baku-san, the poet?
I am surprised
The Baku-san I see in your poems
Is nothing like the gentleman I see before me.
I shrugged without thinking
And then raised my head and said
Of the old Baku you see in the poems and
The gentleman Baku you see here—
Who is the real Baku, I wonder?
At which the person looked up
And said Well, I'm not sure
And—maybe because something was wrong with their neck—
Cocked their head again

Daryl Maude
It Takes All Sorts

Yamanokuchi Baku
世はさまざま

People eat rice
And my namesake
the monster called the *baku*
Eats dreams, they say
Sheep will eat paper
And bedbugs come to suck blood
And there are people
Who come in to eat people, and people who go out to eat people
And, thinking about it, in my homeland of Ryukyu
There is a tree called the *umumā*
For a tree it looks ugly, but it is like a poet:
Standing in graveyards,
Growing on the tears and sad voices of
The people who come and cry.
A strange tree, the *umumā*.

There in the gardens, always
The *tauchī* fighting cocks are thirsty for blood
Each *tauchī*
In his own *mībārā*,* but
All of them squaring their shoulders
So much confidence
Growing tired of waiting for the fight day
Each morning at the Akamine house, *Tanmē*-grandpa
Carrying a tobacco tray
Comes out onto the veranda and sits
Enquires after the health of the *tauchī* in the garden
This morning *Tanmē* was on the veranda but
Maybe his pipe was blocked?
And at the tap-tap of him hitting it
The *tauchī*, to a bird,
Suddenly stretched their necks

*A cage for raising chickens

Yamanokuchi Baku (山之口貊, 1903–1963) was an Okinawan poet and writer of fiction and essays. As a young man, he left his homeland in the southern Ryukyuan archipelago, which had been annexed by Japan and renamed as Okinawa in 1879, and moved to Tokyo, the metropolitan centre of the Japanese Empire. Yamanokuchi Baku, whose real name was Yamaguchi Jūsaburō, took his pen-name, Baku—by which he is known to Japanese readers—from the mythical beast which was supposed to feed on nightmares.

Baku's work avoids complex imagery and flowery expressions and instead uses stark, simple language. His subject matter ranges from everyday encounters with people in bars, or conversations with his wife about money, to descriptions of his Okinawan homeland or meditations on his own identity as Okinawan. In metropolitan Tokyo, Okinawans were the subject of much prejudice, being seen as exotic and primitive. Baku, like many others, had to endure the problem of worrying about how best to explain himself and his origins to other people. In his most well-known poem, "A Conversation" ("Kaiwa"), he describes being asked by a woman "Where are you from?" He imagines describing his homeland, with its sub-tropical plants and different customs, and the inevitable stereotypes of a land of "indigo seas" and "everlasting summer" that will arise in the woman's mind. The poem, like much of Baku's work, is wryly humorous, but has a dark, serious core—unwilling to tell her directly that he is Okinawan, the poet is forced to become increasingly circuitous about how he presents his identity. Another example of Baku's dark humor can be seen in "It Takes All Sorts," in which he likens poets to the legendary *umumā* tree, which feasts on people's sadness, at once poking fun at himself and also questioning the ethics of his art.

Translation of Baku's poetry is challenging due to this wry humor injected into many of the lines, and also due to the simplicity and strong sense of rhythm of his writing has. Japanese often leaves out the subject of a sentence when it is thought to be known to all parties, and so when translating poems I have tried to replicate the clipped, concise effect of the original as much as possible, while still rendering the poems intelligible for English speakers by inserting pronouns, or naming the speaker of a particular line. While I never had to worry about translating complicated sentences or rendering obscure metaphors in intelligible English, trying to replicate Baku's short sentences and also

deal with his sparse use of punctuation—which I have tried to follow as much as possible—was a challenge. When I showed my translations to two Okinawan friends, they tried to retranslate the works from English back into Japanese in a sparing, funny, Baku-esque fashion. “No, no,” one would say to the other. “Simpler! Say it like Baku-san would!”

The title of the poem “Heads” is “Kubi” in the original Japanese, a word which can refer to either the head or the neck, depending on its context. Some people may find the use of “their” jarring as a third-person singular pronoun, but in the original the gender of the other speaker is unspecified, and could equally be female or male. I decided to retain this ambiguity. Another problem in translating his poetry is Baku’s use of *Uchināguchi*, or Okinawan language, as in “Okinawan Scene.” Inserted in the Japanese text, the Okinawan words are sometimes in *katakana*, the script often used for loanwords in Japanese, and sometimes in *kanji*, or Chinese characters. Baku’s *kanji*, while readily readable to a Japanese-speaking audience, are glossed with nonstandard, Okinawan pronunciations above them in *katakana*, making them sound different. When translating the poem into English, I have tried to keep the *Uchināguchi* words intact, adding on English words afterwards with hyphens to try to replicate the experience of reading a familiar word along with an unfamiliar one. I have also kept the asterisk footnote in which Baku explains what a *mībārā* is.